



GRACE CHURCH

Discipline

Hebrews 12:3-17

Grace Church | 3.12.23

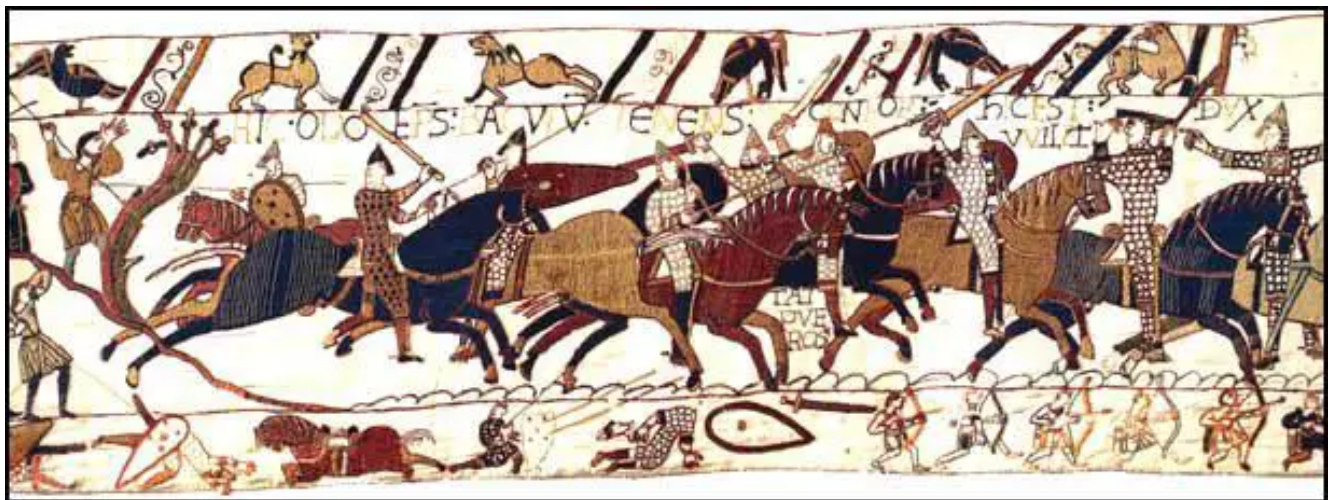
One particularly resource my family has found helpful for our worship or prayer time is a small book of short devotionals called *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing* by Sally Lloyd Jones. You may recognize Jones as the author of the *Jesus Storybook Bible*. I commandeered my sons well worn copy this morning because I wanted to share one with you. It's called "Comforter" and the text for the devotional is John 14:16, where Jesus says "I will pray to the Father, and he will send you the Comforter".

God's Spirit is called the "Comforter". Does it make you think of a nice comfy quilt—all cozy and warm? Oh dear.

In the Bayeux tapestry of 1066, there's a knight on a horse and the caption reads: "Bishop Odo comforts his troops." Is Bishop Odo giving them nice fluffy quilts? No, look! He's prodding them from behind with a stick! NOT comfy.

But Odo is spurring them on, encouraging them, urging them to keep going and not give up. Because comfort in the Bible doesn't mean "to make comfy." It means "to send help."

When we want to give up, when we are afraid, God sends his Spirit—the Comforter—to make us strong, to give us courage, to lift us up.



Now, if that doesn't summarize Hebrews 12:3-17, I don't know what would. Remember last week we learned an important truth—that life is like a race, but that race is far more like a battle, a struggle, a wrestling match, than a friendly jog. And we also learned we are not built strong enough to endure: we have trouble throwing off sin that hinders us, or burdens we aren't meant to bear, or standing still and trusting God when we are tempted to want quick solutions to complex issues. So we are more fragile than strong, and the great call of our endurance is to fix our eyes on Jesus, our prize. If we abandon him and lose sight of him, none of the hardship of life will be worth it. And so we ended our time last week considering that in this call to endure, Jesus is the one who goes before, endures for us, and *finishes* our faith, finishes our race. So endurance is all about trusting that God in Christ is completing us, taking us to the end.

But *how* does God take us to the end? What is the evidence that he is finishing our faith, leading us along to finish the race. The evidence is his comfort, his help. But like Sally Lloyd Jones said, if life is a battle, God would be foolish to send us a blanket for comfort. His comfort, like Bishop Odo in the tapestry, often comes in the form of his rod. **God's great comfort to us—the evidence for us that he is for us and working in us to make sure we finish the race—is his discipline.**

But we need the right perspective. As we look and consider Jesus, **verse 3**, we see that what he endured was much worse than we can imagine—he endured hostility from sinners, shedding his own blood. Even God turned aside his face from him on the cross. But like this small house church, that isn't us quite yet, **verse 4**. We have not yet reached the end of the race, where the blood is spilt.

So why does it feel like it? Because **verse 5**, like the audience of the book of Hebrews, we have forgotten that God's discipline is *good*. It doesn't feel good like the audience of the book of Hebrews, we have forgotten that God's discipline is *good*. It doesn't feel good—it feels like death. But what God is really doing is preparing us for death, for glorious death, like Jesus, death that ushers us into glory. So we are met with a reminder, a lesson, from Proverbs 3, don't think lightly of God's discipline, and don't get tired of it. To think lightly of God's discipline would be to disdain it, to ignore it, to blow it off, like a child who scoffs at receiving a time out. To grow weary of God's discipline is to buck against it by assuming we actually have learned our lesson and God is just overdoing it. It's a lack of trust either way, a sign that we need *more* discipline, not less.

So today let's learn to see God's discipline for what it is: our great good. Let's not think lightly of it, or ignore or get tired of it. Let's consider three reasons we should endure in and even rejoice in the discipline of God: 1) it teaches us to trust God as Father; 2) it shapes us to share in God's holiness, and 3) it prepares us to make it to the end together.



We endure discipline... Because it teaches us to trust God as Father.

One of the primary reasons for discipline is education. All parents know how vital this is: you can teach your children to read and write and do simple math—but a child is far better off in the world knowing true virtue than acing the SAT. So, from the earliest age, you begin to teach by way of discipline. It starts small—perhaps a gentle but firm smack on the wrist for an infant who needs not to learn to touch things that could be dangerous, or a strong “no”. And then it gains traction—soon you are laying down real consequences for disobedience. This is one of the easiest Proverbs to understand, and perhaps one of the hardest to implement: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.” The cruelest thing we can do to our children is leave them to themselves with no education in what is right and wrong and beautiful and not.

In the same way, the word for discipline in this text is where we get our word for “pedagogy”, and likewise shares the same core root as words like “pediatrics”. The root there is “child”. Yes, the text is saying we are like children, who need the loving correction of a teacher, a doctor, but most of all, a Father. The Lord disciplines those he *loves*, **verse 6**.

There is also an argument here from the lesser to the greater. Every Father, says **verse 7**, disciplines his children in some way. They do it, according to **verse 10**, for a “short time” (18ish years), and they do their best. We all know parents aren’t perfect—perhaps we were spanked too much, perhaps too little. Perhaps they let things slide they shouldn’t have, or at times were angry or harsh. Perhaps too you have a strained relationship, memories you can’t put back, unreconciled differences—and yet when you look back as an adult, you respect the fact that no parent who is trying, however imperfectly, lets you do whatever you want.

These days we want to blame our family of origin for nearly every flaw we have—and no doubt there is real pain there, and real generational brokenness. I’ve had one friend tell me that parenting is an acknowledgement that you will definitely mess your kids up in some way, and good parenting is recognizing which ways. But most parents are doing their best. Notice what the text says discipline means: if you are disciplined by your parents, it means they are your real parents. In the ancient world, illegitimate children were not educated. They were not trained, and never disciplined by their father. The reason was that they were not the ones who would inherit—so the urgency was not there.

So what does it mean when we are disciplined by the Lord? It means that he is treating us as his legitimate *heirs*. That in Christ, we are the inheritors of Heaven itself, of God’s very kingdom. Were God not to train us up in discipline in order to be worthy of that inheritance, he would be foolish, leaving all he has to spoiled children. And God is not foolish. Instead, through discipline he teaches us about himself—that he is our Heavenly Father who cares and loves enough to teach us to become worthy of the inheritance he has set aside for us.



Maybe an example will help you—so think of the story of Job with me. Job was not doing poorly in life. The narrator starts his story by telling us that he was “blameless and upright”. God had blessed him immensely. And yet, God allows Satan to bring all sorts of disaster on Job and his family, terrible sickness, death, loss of everything he owned. Suddenly, Job is in a very vulnerable position—and he is ready to receive¹. So God speaks, reveals his sovereign hand and his true character. He teaches Job who he really is. God allows hardship, suffering, and even physical pain in Job’s life—not because he was a wayward child, but because he desired that Job grow even deeper in maturity and trust. Job learned that God always knows what his children need, that he is the one who gives, and the one who takes away, and that above all else he is to be trusted.

In the same way, God may be disciplining you. It may not even be a correction to what you have done wrong. And God himself doesn’t have to be the author of that evil either. He *allows* Satan to have his way with Job, just as he may *allow* some suffering in your life. The difficulties of your job, the aches and pains of your body, whatever it may be... God may allow such a pain, but it always has a purpose. God is teaching you. He loves you—the goal of his instruction is not that you would be crushed, or destroyed, but rather, **verse 9**, that you may live! If you recognize the instruction of your imperfect parents being for your general good—do not disdain God’s discipline, instead accept it. Unlike your parents, his discipline is not “for a short time”, but he is always watching over us, and his discipline, **verse 10**, is *always* for your good, *always* perfect.

...Because it shapes us to share in God’s holiness.

If God is our loving Father and he is *always* and *perfectly* out to teach us what is good, namely to teach us to trust him, what happens when we are stubborn? The text teaches us also that discipline is not just to teach us a lesson about God, but to mold and shape us to act like God. Look at **verse 10**. We might call this God’s *corrective* discipline. When we are stuck in patterns of unholiness, when we are given over to idols and lusts, we must be trained not just to trust God, but to act like it.

Holiness is all that is pure and perfect. I will be the first to admit that holiness does not feel appealing on most days. The reality is that sin is easy—it feels natural, something we slip into, something that sneaks up on us. Given over to ourselves we will always glide smoothly into the sin that is one click away, one thought away. But holiness is not like that. Look at **verse 11**, we are told that the path to holiness is difficult, it requires both pain and patience. We don’t slip quickly into holiness, we don’t fall into it. ANd because holiness is hard, painful, we tend to value it less than we value our pet sins. What we have forgotten is the great beauty and value of holiness. Listen to how Jonathan Edwards puts it:

¹ Kent Hughes uses this parallel, as well as the categories of Educational, Corrective, and Preventive discipline in *Hebrews: Preaching the Word*.



"Holiness is a most beautiful, lovely thing. Men are apt to drink in strange notions of holiness from their childhood, as if it were a melancholy, morose, sour, and unpleasant thing; but there is nothing in it but what is sweet and ravishingly lovely. 'Tis the highest beauty and amiableness, vastly above all other beauties; 'tis a divine beauty."

What makes holiness so valuable? Because it is divine. God is holy—and all truly good things come from God. To be holy, blameless before God, is to be free to enjoy everything God has made with no guilt, to enjoy life to the absolute fullness, to truly enjoy *God* himself. It's a "peaceful fruit of righteousness". No wonder it is so valuable!

And no wonder it is so hard. Does anything of true value come easy? Can you put a price on divine beauty? Holiness is the great treasure in the field that we sell everything for. And what God is teaching us today is that the point of his discipline is so that he could rid you of your sin and in its place put his own holiness.

When Jesus, our forerunner and the perfecter of our faith, went up to the cross, his blood served as the mechanism by which you can be washed and made holy. Sometimes we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy", a refrain of awe to God for his perfection. But Jesus ran his race so you don't have to just look on God's holiness with awe—but that you can share in it.

My wife has been re-reading the famous British novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly to prepare to teach it to her class. I remember reading it a few years ago as part of a book club. If you aren't familiar, it's not just a monster story, it's a creation story. Dr. Frankenstein brings to life this creature, but doesn't realize what he has done. He is horrified, ashamed. There is no love for his creation. And as the book progresses (no big spoilers!), what we begin to see is the monster desires love and affection so much that he becomes enraged at his creator for not giving it to him. But what he desires most of all is not just affection, but purpose. He wants to learn to be virtuous. In the monster's own words, he says:

To be a great and virtuous man appeared the highest honor that can befall a sensitive being; to be base and vicious, as many on record have been, appeared the lowest degradation, a condition more abject than that of the blind mole or harmless worm."

Eventually the monster takes a turn, becomes violent, scared, confused, angry. In the end, the monster despairs of life and hates his creator. Why? Because he knows that the highest good in the world is to learn to be holy, but he has no examples, no teacher, no one to discipline him into knowing what is right. There is no purpose to his existence, no plan to his pain.



Friends, God has a plan for your pain. It is the highest good of your life that you would be holy. **Verse 14** tells us that without holiness, we won't receive our reward. God, your creator and your Father, knows this. This is why he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. He did it so that you would be declared his legitimate child, and so that he could teach you what is most valuable, most desired, most heavenly: to be like Him. So you can trust his discipline when it comes as a sign of his love.

...Because it prepares us to make it to the end together.

We have seen God's educational discipline, and his corrective discipline. Now let's look at what we can call God's *preventative* discipline. Discipline not only teaches us lessons in the moment about God and his character, and not only does it work to make us holy in the moment, but it also prepares us for the moments when we need endurance in the future.

We see this most clearly in the exhortation of **verse 12-13**. Because God is the one who disciplines us for our good, we get stronger. That word "strengthen" is similar to our word "orthopedic"—it's a building up of our muscles and bones, a strengthening of our back and shoulders.

Do you remember how last week we talked about how we need to get stronger, to endure, by looking to Jesus? The great part is, because we are united to Christ and are given the spirit of God, it's not just Christ abstractly that we trust in the moment (i.e. saying can't do it, I guess I'll just give in and ask for forgiveness later, since Christ can), but Christ working through us. So we actually do get stronger, and we ourselves are the conquerors of sin and Satan through Christ's power.

God's discipline makes us into the kind of people that can endure the most severe kinds of temptation. It makes us strong, and the beautiful thing is that it makes us strong *together*. Sometimes God disciplines not just individuals, but entire groups of people, his people. The goal of his discipline is not that you would be strong while your brothers and sisters are weak. **Verse 15** tells us that the point of all this is that *no one* will fail to obtain the grace of God, the prize at the end.

This is what the author means by referencing the "root of bitterness". It's not an attitude of bitterness per se, but rather a root that is bitter. He is referencing Deuteronomy 29, where God warns the Israelites that in their midst there might be some with stubborn hearts, who refuse the discipline of God. They are like a poisonous root, which can contaminate and defile everyone. These are those who have rejected God, and are not legitimate children of God, the ones we are warned against earlier Hebrews as those who have abandoned their faith and not endured.



The example of this given is actually Esau, who serves as a foil to the “hall of faith” in chapter 11. Esau is scribed as “unholy” and “sexually immoral”. Why? Because instead of desiring holiness, he desired a meal. In an instant, he traded the most valuable thing he had, his birthright, his legitimately as a son—for the sensual gratification of a bowl of stew. **Verse 17** tells us that he couldn't take it back.

So what do we take from all this? Seems a little out of place, until we consider the metaphor of the race again. Esau took his eyes off the prize. He failed to obtain the grace of God, because he was too wrapped up in his desires being gratified. His heart was stubborn, he had no faith. He didn't make it.

We must be careful then, not to let our sensual desires pull us away from embracing God's discipline. Again, sin is easy. It promises a lot and seems to ask a little. But what sin is really asking for is everything—the price of sin is the forfeiting of our birthright, our legitimacy as sons.

But, as Hebrews has already told us, we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed. We know that if God disciplines us, it's because we are real sons. We are not Esau, the one who trades their legitimacy, but Issac, the one who receives it undeservedly.

Listen intently as we close. The reason we are real children, legitimate children, the reason we can rejoice in God's discipline, the reason we can know beyond all doubt that we will make it to the end, is because of our great older brother, Jesus, the forerunner of our faith.

He never gave into instant gratification. Issac, Jacob's brother, had to catch him in a vulnerable spot and prey on him to give up his birthright. But Jesus is the true older brother, who was tempted by Satan to give up his birthright for a loaf of bread and some earthly position, and did not give in. He resisted all temptation, not so he can keep his birthright for himself, but so he can sit down across the table from us and give his birthright up. Although we compromise even daily, all our wrongs are made right in Christ's perfect faith. We are legitimate children because Jesus gave up his life so that we would be welcomed into God's family, so that he could give us his standing before God as heirs.

God will discipline you in this life. It will hurt. But he is treating you as a son, an heir, in Christ. **God's great comfort to us—the evidence for us that he is for us and working in us to make sure we finish the race—is his discipline.** Do not then regard his discipline lightly, or grow weary of it. Instead, strengthen your weak knees and keep going—God is on your side.

